Democracy, Freedom, and Despotism

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Alexis de Tocqueville only lived from 1805 to 1859 and, yet, he is still considered, by many, to be one of the greatest political writers of all time. He has been compared to the likes of such writers and thinkers as Aristotle, Montesquieu, Voltaire, and others. He wrote extensively on political science, political philosophy, history, and societies. Tocqueville's magnum opus is *Democracy in America* published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840 respectively. Among some of the topics discussed in his book are 'democracy,' 'freedom,' and 'despotism,' along with their relations to one another. This essay will examine and assess the relationship between 'democracy,' 'freedom,' and 'despotism' in Tocqueville's thought, along with his solutions to combating despotism.

For Tocqueville, 'democracy' can be seen as a peaceful, free, 'equality of conditions' as opposed to the European tendency towards aristocracy (3-15). 'Aristocracy,' in this case, is legal classism that provides extra rights, privileges, and immunities, to the higher echelon of society, often through heredity. In contrast to aristocracy, it is through democracy that markets are able to flourish and create prosperous lives for the masses while simultaneously protecting 'human freedom,' which Tocqueville describes as "the source of all moral greatness" (231, 11). Additionally, democracy

transmits the concept of ‘political rights’ equally through, even to, the least of citizens rather than keeping classes ignorant of their rights as pertaining to society or government (228). This sort of flourishing and equality through a democratic government provides a utilitarian well-being for the greatest number of people in society; and this is a key point made by Tocqueville (223). It is the imperative of a democratic government to protect society “for governments perish, and society cannot die” (229).

Tocqueville did not hesitate to compare and contrast democracy with aristocracy albeit he still had preference for democracy as a whole. He stated that aristocracy, unlike democracy, was more capable of skillfully running a governing body, it holds that it does not benefit that everyone is able to vote, and more adequately inspired the arts, among other things (233-234). Yet, aristocracy is a stronger form of despotism than democracy, and this is more reason that Tocqueville turns toward democracy.

Although Tocqueville held democracy in the highest esteem, he was justifiably apt to point out that democracy is not only a means to maintain freedom for society, but it is also a form of soft despotism especially through ‘legislative instability’ and ‘tyranny of the majority’ (238-242). Despotism can be defined as the absolute and arbitrary centralized power by one or few. Legislative instability, in a democratic government, is born by the very nature of democracy as sovereign power is given to the governing body exasperatedly and accelerated by perpetual voting with cycles of newly elected representatives (238). Tyranny of the majority

especially occurs in a democratic government where the majority of individuals that vote for a particular thing have their collective say over the desires of the minority (239-240).

In order to counter legislative instability and the tyranny of the majority, Tocqueville put faith in the ideology of ‘justice’ to form a protective boundary for each individual. ‘Justice,’ in this sense, is the equality of all individuals under the democratic law as representing the “universal society” and the “sovereignty of the human race” (240). Nevertheless, Alexis de Tocqueville articulated that democracy was the best choice for society as it exalted liberty and freedom more than other forms of government were even capable. He held dearly the idea that the great privilege of democracy is that its citizens are able to repair their mistakes, either politically or individually, which also helps to combat against tyranny or despotism (222-223). It is through democratic freedom that one can understand the pertinent links between ‘liberty,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘responsibility’ in that freedom from others in a democratic state allows for natural liberties to thrive while one is also responsible for their own actions.

Liberty, more precious than freedom, is only preserved by freedom. Democratic freedom originally emerged in a time of civil discord and is usually recognized much later, whereas aristocratic benefits are recognized immediately, but only for a short duration (229). Tocqueville’s examples of freedom in a democratic state, and “the two great weapons,” include ‘freedom of the press’ and ‘freedom of association’ (172-186). ‘Freedom of

the press,' as Tocqueville rightfully identifies, is crucial for the decentralization of opinion and, ultimately, power (176-177). In nations where there is no freedom of the press, the narrative is centralized to the benefit of those in power with their voice and opinion to be the clincher. 'Freedom of association,' and specifically 'political association,' is the free and voluntary association of people in assembly with one another (183). These people can meet for whatever reason they wish, e.g. politics, commerce, religion, etc. as they may in 'civil associations' (181, 498). These associations are comparable to being governments within a government and are a "necessary guarantee against the tyranny of the majority." Much like how the 'freedom of the press' decentralizes the voice, 'freedom of association' decentralizes ideas and persons (183).

According to Tocqueville, freedom, specifically the freedom of the press and association, have a decentralizing characteristic which helps to prevent despotism. However, he also shows how freedom can actually lead to form despotism. It is often thought that when there is nearly unfettered freedom, tyranny can emerge from the collective will of the majority who form associations (91). When the majority-representing groups use their freedom of the press, it is of greatest difficulty to root out ideas held by the masses once they are accepted (178). Thus, freedom has the narrow potential to descend into despotism through the free acts of people assembling and voicing their stances.

In defense of democracy, and more specifically democracy in America, Tocqueville wrote, “I am persuaded that if despotism ever comes to be established in America, it will find more difficulties in defeating the habits to which freedom has given birth than in surmounting the love of freedom itself” (233). This means that in a democratic state, such as that of America, it is easier to quash the love of freedom than it is to get the ideas out of the minds of the masses of all of the enjoyments that freedom brings with it. Tocqueville believed that democratic freedom was already well established in America and that despotism was unlikely to ever come about (251).

The form of despotism most likely to take hold in America, according to Tocqueville, is that of ‘administrative despotism’ (661-665). It is seen as being a decision by the sovereign people of society by requesting to be led by a few rather than living freely (664). This ever-changing administration grows over time to become the ultramonarchical monster which initially prompted the American Revolution from the portrayed despot of England. To continually vote for additional powers to be granted to the administrative government takes from the powers of the people as free individuals and limits the capacity society has in order to be free (665). The purpose of democracy was to have decentralized powers equal to all, as opposed to providing unrestricted rights to that of a central body. The outcome of people freely coming together in association maintains the decentralization of government within a democracy.

Tocqueville's main solution for combating despotism is through a free democracy with decentralized powers where individuals form associations with one another in large numbers for particular causes (489-492). These associations are first brought about through self-interest where it does not necessary require self-sacrifice, but rather small amounts of self-denial from regularity, foresight, self-command, etc. (502). With the doctrine of self-interest in liberty, in conjunction with democratic virtues, government is not required to coerce people into sacrificing themselves for the beneficence of their fellow creatures because the moral gauge of free people tends to suggest helping others voluntarily (500-503). Tocqueville goes on to say, "The doctrine of self-interest well understood seems to me of all the philosophic theories the most appropriate to the needs of men in our time, and that I see in it the most powerful guarantee against themselves that remains to them," (502-503).

Once free people of self-interest find commonality with others, they form associations for causes and solutions. Where governments are not providing for these causes and solutions, people voluntarily do so in a democratic society. As long as these associations do not relinquish their tasks to that of a centralized governing body, despotism is kept at bay. The more a government does for society the less free a people are, and the less democracy or equality of conditions there is (491). The essential difference between an association accomplishing a goal versus a government doing so is that an association does so through peaceful and voluntary means

whereas a government does so coercively through the use of force and the potential threat of violence, i.e. fines, imprisonment, death, etc. Tocqueville did not hold vast anarchist views, instead he held that government should be restricted to prevent despotism from arising from a state or through society.

In conclusion, Alexis de Tocqueville believed in democracy along with the concepts of ‘liberty,’ and ‘freedom’ where individuals can freely express themselves through speech or writing, and associate as they see fit. These principles, he saw, were what limited despotism from forming as a centralized power. Although he was able to point out flaws in even his own convictions of ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom,’ he was able to demonstrate that together these are the best alternative to ‘aristocracy,’ ‘centralized powers,’ and ‘despotism.’

Work Cited

Tocqueville, Alexis de, et al. *Democracy in America*. University of Chicago Press, 2000.